

The 'New Urbanist' Company?

Today's smartest community designers borrowed a word from the French and built a remarkable process for crafting amazing neighborhoods. Can charrettes be the savior of Corporate America? Ben Brown explores.



Companies are **communities.**

Think about it: They connect customers, employees and investors in much the same way neighborhoods and towns connect citizens. When communities and companies can't make the right connections, it almost always has something to do with planning and design.

So, shouldn't we be looking at the leaders in community design for help?

Among the pacesetters in that arena right now are architect-planner Andres Duany and other practitioners of the New Urbanist movement that created Seaside in Florida, Kentlands in Maryland, and 600-plus designs for new towns and traditional neighborhoods across the country. Their projects build in connectivity.

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gates residential, commercial and retail land use, New Urbanist designs go for the feel of traditional neighborhoods before cars ruled. They are mixed-use environments where most daily needs are within a five-minute walk. Public realms, where official buildings live and where citizens casually meet on sidewalks and in parks and plazas, are honored with design attention so that they are useful and beautiful spaces. As a result, the private realm of homes and yards doesn't need to be of gargantuan scale to compensate. Everything relates.

What's remarkable about the process that creates these kinds of places is that it relies heavily on one of the least popular activities in American business life: the meeting.

In many companies, meetings are schools for cynicism. Workers waste hundreds of hours in sessions where nothing is ever decided or where everything will be or already has been decided by somebody else. New Urbanist planners, on the other hand, get from idea to action with a meeting process that aspires to be what Bill Lennertz calls “a transformative event.”

Lennertz, an architect who began his career with Duany's Miami firm, is executive director of the Oregon-based National Charrette Institute, a nonprofit organization that teaches the New Urbanist meeting method named after a French wheeled cart that collected student work in Paris art schools. Like students everywhere, the artists procrastinated and often ran alongside charrettes feverishly drawing and painting on their canvases as the carts bumped along the streets toward their professors' studios.

New Urbanist charrettes are similarly designed to collect ideas as they evolve. They even have artists who sketch interim versions of the concepts as they roll toward consensus.

Designs that come out of these charrettes are often so complete and detailed that they include building codes and

architectural guidelines. What's more, these road maps for development emerge after just a week of concentrated meetings instead of after months, maybe years, of fiddling and negotiating.

“The best charrettes,” says Lennertz, “are where development is imminent. There's money on the table. Something is going to happen.”

In fact, the charrette, as refined by Duany and NCI, imposes that sense of urgency. Everybody, especially top management, has to agree that what comes from the process within the time

frame is an actionable plan. And everybody who has a stake in the outcome has to be at the table for at least part of the discussion. In real estate development, that means the fire marshal, suspicious environmentalists and adjacent property owners, along with developers and their customers. “We want the potential deal blockers as well as proponents,” says Lennertz.

Sounds like a recipe for organizational paralysis, right? Not to a developer

like Joe Alfandre, who was under a time crunch in the late 1980s to create a plan for 350 acres of real estate in the Maryland suburbs of Washington, D.C. The charrette, says Alfandre, “was a way to get a lot of smart people in one room completely focused on one thing. Questions could be asked and answered at the same time. I got priceless advice from a cross-section of people. When ideas are allowed to be considered in an unbiased setting, the best ones emerge.”

Although Alfandre's project, Kentlands, struggled with financing issues and with government regulators in the early 1990s, loyalists to the charrette-inspired community design kept it alive until economic forces kicked in. Now it's a showcase mixed-use community with some 1,800 residences. “That's a real validation of the charrette,” says Alfandre.

“As people go through this process, they're hooked,” says Lennertz. “They feel part of the team and begin to understand





the complexity of the project. Experts who come in thinking only about one thing become educated in other areas. That's when they begin to lose their cynicism."

So, can businesses beyond real estate development gain anything by adapting the design charrette as a meeting model? Why not? "It's really a production process," says Lennertz. "A charrette can be used to produce anything you want. The business community could get this in a heartbeat. All you have to do is ask people if they'd rather have endless meetings or decide something in a few days of intense discussions."

But if you promise this kind of environment for decision-making, "you'd better deliver a good meeting," says Lennertz. "People have to walk out thinking they were listened to and that they had a chance to influence outcomes."

Nathan Norris, a principal in the PlaceMakers consulting firm that helps developers with New Urbanist ambitions, cautions that "the charrette word is popular these days, but too

many people shortcut the process." They eliminate crucial feedback loops in the effort to reduce the time frame to a day or so, or they cheap out on prep work and facilitation expertise.



"It costs more upfront to do charrettes the right way," says Norris. "It's a hard job to get everybody there." And making sure the process is not hijacked by one point of view, including the point of view of the boss, is "an art form," he says.

The payoff on the other end, however, can be substantial. Because they participated in designing the action plan, key players won't have to be sold on the final idea. Potential doubters become likely advocates. And when consensus emerges, it brings with it a sense of purpose and a renewed focus on results.

"It's remarkable what it does when you work with people who know and share your values," says Lennertz. "From your values emerge your key strategies." **W**

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